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Russia's Duma Elections:

Why they should matter to the United States

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Conclusions

- Russia's legislative elections, scheduled for 17 December, have only limited legal significance, because most power is concentrated in the presidency. However, the elections will be viewed in Moscow as an indicator of the popular mood and will serve as a surrogate presidential primary.
- All indications are that the parliamentary election will not represent a fair sounding of the electorate. Virtually all participants in the election process will use the levers they control to manipulate the outcome: from buying signatures, to obstructing competitors' access to the media, to tampering with the vote count after the election.
- Government attempts to influence the outcome of the parliamentary elections probably will temper, but not neutralize, the anti-Government and anti-Yeltsin sentiment of the electorate. However, it is still too early to assess the likelihood of the Communist/nationalist sweep predicted by reformists like Yegor Gaidar.
- If hardliners do particularly well in the December elections and use their enhanced position in the new Duma to publicly challenge Boris Yeltsin, this could set the stage for another legislative/executive crisis.

Significance of the Legislative Elections

The two-year terms of both the lower houses (State Duma) and upper house (Federation Council) are due to expire in December. However, the only election currently scheduled is for the State Duma. The chances are remote that elections to a new Federation Council will be on the ballot this December, primarily because Yeltsin fiercely opposes an upper house directly elected by the people and has vetoed legislation mandating upper house elections.

The Duma elections have limited significance from a legal standpoint. The bicameral legislature--thanks to the Constitution drafted by the executive branch and adopted through a referendum in 1993--has little legal authority. In fact, over the past two years, the executive branch has ruled with very little direct interference from parliament. When the legislature adopts measures distasteful to the executive, Yeltsin generally vetoes the legislation and issues a presidential decree on the issue. Regardless of the outcome of the election, the legislature can do little to effect direct changes in policy.

The December elections, however, have symbolic significance that goes well beyond the parliament's ability to directly affect policy.

- First, Duma elections--in particular the party list vote, which will determine the makeup of half of the Duma's 450 deputies--will be seen by the Moscow political elite as a rough measure of which political forces enjoy the most popular support. In that sense, the Duma elections are a test of the legitimacy of the Yeltsin regime. The pattern of populist support revealed through the elections will also play a role in the formation of future political alliances.
- Second, because several of the parties vying in the legislative election are associated with presidential contenders, the elections will function as a kind of presidential primary, shaping perceptions within the Moscow political elite and Kremlin insiders as to the probable outcome of the June presidential elections.
- Third, if one group or coalition manages to sweep the elections and gain an overwhelming majority, it would be in a position to override a presidential veto or initiate impeachment proceedings--moves that could pave the way for a replay of the executive-legislative conflict that ended in Yeltsin's attack on the old parliament in the fall of 1993.

Weakness of Democracy

Although the mere holding of elections is a positive step towards the development of democratic practices, the election process itself has highlighted the fragility of democracy in Russia. It has also demonstrated how deeply ingrained are the habits of bureaucratic politics and authoritarian thinking inherited from the Soviet era.

Perhaps the most telling indicator of the weakness of democratic values is the continued doubt over whether elections will be held at all. During the summer and fall of 1993, key Moscow power-brokers, led by selected members of Yeltsin's entourage, were trying to strike a deal to extend the powers of both the parliament and President for an additional two years, perhaps even longer. The deal, however, never came to fruition. The law governing Duma elections was adopted last June; and the campaign process has moved forward, leading most Russians to conclude that the parliamentary elections will actually take place in December.

However, there are still lingering doubts about whether parliamentary elections will be held, especially in light of President Yeltsin's precarious health. Uncertainties surrounding Yeltsin's condition or a flare-up in the Chechen fighting could be used to justify a postponement. Additionally, some reformists--fearing a hardline sweep--as well as the Supreme Court are challenging the constitutionality of the electoral law, which (if successful) could entail a postponement of the ballot. Even the chairman of the Constitutional Court has raised the possibility of invalidating the election results if so many parties fail to make the five-percent cutoff in the party list vote that the winners represent less than half of the voters.

Even if the elections go forward as scheduled, these continuing uncertainties reveal a strong perception that Yeltsin, his advisors, and even the parliament view elections as optional. This ambivalence about the elections also demonstrates the extent to which Russia's leaders see democratic procedures as alternate venues for the traditional power struggle between competing elites.

Election Process: The State Duma

Duma election laws provide for both a party list vote and single-seat districts. In both cases, a minimum of 25 percent of the registered voters must participate to make the election valid.

Half of the 450 Duma deputies will be selected through a party list, in which voters will cast their ballots in favor of a party (vice an individual candidate). To get on this portion of the ballot, a political group must have not only registered its complete slate of candidates with the Central Electoral Commission, but also (by October 22) collected 200,000 signatures (with no more than 7 percent from a single province). Parties that receive at least five percent of the party list vote in the election will be allocated a portion of the 225 seats. For instance, a party receiving twenty percent of the party list vote will be allocated 45 seats plus twenty percent of those seats remaining from those parties that failed to break the five percent cutoff. It is possible that many parties will fail to break the five-percent cutoff, with those parties that do falling heir to a large number of unallocated seats.

The other half of the State Duma--225 deputies--will be elected in single-seat districts. To get on the ballot, candidates must have collected (by October 22) signatures equal to one percent of the total number of voters in the district. There will be no run-off elections; the candidate with the most votes is declared the winner. As in the 1993 elections, many candidates for single-seat districts positions are likely to run as independents, although they can elect to formally join a faction after the new legislature convenes.

This means that the political correlation of forces in the lower house will not be immediately clear from the formal announcement of the election results. However, the indicator that matters most, in terms of public perceptions of who won and who lost, is the percentage the party wins in the party list race. Parties that do well here will be seen as the winners of the legislative elections, even though other groups may have done much better in the single-seat districts and can later claim the allegiance of a larger Duma faction.

Fair Elections Not Likely

All indications are that the parliamentary election will not represent a fair sounding of the electorate. The Central Electoral Commission has the reputation for partisanship and many believe it may manipulate the vote count. One astute Moscow reformer warned that election observers will not be able to stop or even detect manipulation of voting results at the center.

These fears were reinforced when the Commission refused to register the Yabloko Party (a moderate reformist party headed by Grigori Yavlinsky and running in opposition to Yeltsin policies) and the Derzhava Party (headed by former Vice President Alexander Rutskoy, who led the unsuccessful attempt to foil Yeltsin's 1993 dismissal of the old parliament). Although the Russian Supreme Court overruled the Commission, the incident reflected the high-handed approach many commentators in Russia have predicted the Commission would take.

Indeed, virtually all participants in the election process will use the levers they control to manipulate the outcome: from buying signatures, to obstructing competitors' access to the media, to tampering with the vote count after the election. To some degree, the effects of these activities might cancel each other out. For instance, a conservative regional boss will use his clout to cheat in favor of those supporting him, while a provincial chief with ties to Viktor Chernomyrdin will use his clout to assist Chernomyrdin's

party at the expense of the hardline opposition.

Chernomyrdin's party, however, controls the most levers and has already shown a willingness to use them. Party officials are using the state-run media to provide frequent and positive coverage of party activities. Last summer's gubernatorial elections in Sverdlovsk also provide an indication of the willingness of the Chernomyrdin party to make use of state funds to the advantage of Our Home candidates. Although these efforts were not successful in ensuring a victory for their candidate (who ultimately lost), they surely added substantially to his percentage of the vote and attest to the low level of effectiveness of legal curbs on unfair election practices, as well as the inability of election day monitors to ensure fair elections.

Key Political Parties

Party	Leaders(s)	Foreign Policy
1. Russian Democratic Choice -- United Democrats	Yegor Gaydar	Partnership with the West
2. Yabloko	Grigorii Yavlinsky	Partnership with the West
3. Our Home Is Russia	Viktor Chernomyrdin	Partnership with the West; Great Power Restoration
4. Congress of Russian Communities (KRO)	Yuri Skokov & Alexander Lebed	Great Power Restoration; Moderate Nationalist
5. Communist Party of the Russian Federation	Gennadi Zyuganov	Great Power Restoration; Create a Single Union State; Nationalist
6. Agrarian Party	Mikhail Lapshin	Great Power Restoration; Create a Single Union State; Nationalist
7. Liberal Democratic Party	Vladimir Zhirinovsky	Great Power Restoration; Ultranationalist
8. Derzhava	Alexander Rutskoy	Great Power Restoration; Restore USSR borders; Ultranationalist

Opposition Victory?

Given the volatility of the Russian electorate, election predictions--even those limited to the party list portion of the Duma election--are meaningless at this early stage of the campaign. Around half of the voters have not yet decided which party to vote for and may not make up their minds until the eve of the elections. Turnout patterns, difficult to determine in advance, will also affect election outcomes. For these reasons, current survey results--which suggest that conservative forces are favored by around forty percent of those voters who express a party preference--are not a good guide to election outcomes.

Nonetheless, some political commentators are predicting a sweeping opposition win in December. One reform-minded journalist stated privately that he would consider it a "democratic victory" if the Communists and nationalists won "only" 60 percent of the Duma seats. The strong Communist showing in recent provincial races, coupled with the defeat of the Government-supported candidate in the Sverdlovsk gubernatorial elections, has fueled such speculation.

A strong opposition showing in the Duma elections could destabilize executive-legislative relations. Yeltsin has a history of taking major personal offense at any independent political body, even if it really doesn't represent much of a legal threat to him. If the hardline opposition does well in the December

elections and uses its enhanced position in the new Duma to publicly challenge Yeltsin, this might set the stage for another 1993-style legislative vs executive crisis.

In any event, a strong hardline showing in December will likely strengthen the arguments of those Yeltsin insiders who are pressing the President to cancel the June presidential elections. A strong showing by retired General Alexander Lebed's Congress of Russian Communities party would be particularly threatening to the President's entourage, because Lebed's charismatic personality makes him perhaps the strongest potential challenger for the presidency.

Recommendations

The election season poses a dilemma for the United States, which has a strong stake in both the democratic process and the victory of political moderates. Given the deep alienation of the Russian electorate, it is highly unlikely that either Government-sponsored candidates or those parties with close ties to Western-style reform will do well if the elections are free and fair. A case could be made for turning a blind eye to any manipulation and cheating that favors reformists and centrists like Chernomyrdin's party or for quietly endorsing cancellation of the presidential elections entirely, to avoid the risk of a hardline Russian president with virtually unlimited power.

On the other hand, election fraud and/or cancellation of the presidential elections would represent major--perhaps fatal--blows to already fragile democratic institutions. Moreover, an increasingly assertive Russia is probably inevitable, even if opposition gains in the legislative election are limited and Yeltsin somehow clings to power (legally or illegally) beyond June 1996. These considerations would argue against actions or words that would endorse or encourage any further setbacks to the democratic process in Russia.

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